**Introduction**

Halal food carts have become a staple of the New York streetscape. Their presence on the streets of New York is no longer a novelty: they have become so inconspicuous in the urban context that it seems they have been there forever. It was therefore surprising for us to find out that unlike the quintessential hotdog cart, halal food carts have only been around since 1999. Their prevalence and popularity is even more puzzling given the small niche halal cuisine occupies in the American palate. Operated mostly by Arab speaking vendors and preparing food of Arab origin Halal food carts presented a rich field of investigation into Conflict Urbanism and Language Justice in New York: as Arabic language speakers ourselves our initial interest stemmed from the obvious conflicts and difficulties vendors would run into operating within a predominantly English speaking public.  
  
With obvious clashes within an operation run by predominantly Arabic speaking employees communicating with an English speaking clientele our investigations led us into an attempt at understanding the role language plays in determining the standing of employees, the business opportunities available for vendors and the difficulties they face negotiating regulatory landscapes. Additionally, while Arabic is perceived as a monolithic language, in reality there are a variety of dialects in the Arabic-speaking world, some even barely intelligible to speakers of others. 

**Foodcarts in the New York Streetscape**

On the streetscape of New York, halal food carts perhaps stand out the most to Arab speakers. Within the context of signage, advertising a cultural icon such as the word halal “حلال” is an anomaly. Our research was interested in the inevitable conflicts that would arise from the interaction between vendors translating the content and nature of the halal cuisine to an English speaking population. Another of our interests is how language differences, whether it be English speaking proficiency or different Arabic dialects played out within the operation of a food cart.  
  
Our research hence focused on interviewing a number of halal food cart vendors, asking questions about their daily exchanges with customers, their English speaking abilities and how that affects their performance within the food carts. 

**Halal in Midtown Manhattan**

The interviewed food cart vendors were all of Egyptian origin with the exception of one vendor from Algeria. The questions were aimed at establishing a number of facts that would help us gain a clear understanding of the daily experience and located mainly in midtown Manhattan.  
  
The questions for our interviewees were:   
  
+ Do you speak arabic? بتحكي عربي؟  
+ Where are you from? إنت من وين؟  
+ When did you come to America? To NY? متى جئت إلى أمريكا؟ إلى نيو يورك؟  
+ How did you get this job? كيف حصلت على هذا الشغل؟  
+ Where is the food prepared? وين بتصنعوا الأكل؟  
+ What is your typical day? ممكن توصفلي يوم عادي في الشغل؟  
+ How did you learn english? كيف تعلمت إنجليزي؟

+ What is your (arabic) dialect? من وين لهجتك؟  
+ Do you like this spot? Have you worked in any others? تحب هذه الموقع؟ شتغلت في موقع آخر؟  
+ Is this cart connected to a restaurant? هل هذه العربة متابعة لمطعم؟  
+ Who own the halal food truck? من صاحب هذه العربة؟  
+ Who are your customers? من هم زبائنكم؟   
+ What makes a strong market? ما يجعل السوق قوي؟

We interviewed a total of 7 food cart operators, their responsibilities ranging from manning the grill, to recruiting workers, to managing the entire operation. It became obvious to us that a number of language interactions were taking place within the food cart and between food cart and customers.  
  
The most prominent of these language operations was the hierarchy that organizes the work within the food cart. This was directly linked to the workers’ English speaking proficiency. Workers would either work the grill and stock the food or deal directly with customers. It became obvious that these tasks rarely overlap. Employees with better English-speaking ability dealt directly with customers and translated the orders requested for the grill worker. They were the de facto managers of the food cart, in charge of most managerial tasks. These workers tended to be more educated than their counterparts even though they shared the same backgrounds.   
  
  
This hierarchy is pronounced on the food cart between 52nd and 53rd street on 6th Ave and on the one on the North West corner of 47th and Broadway. In this first case the food cart, run by cousins from the same town in the north of Egypt (Banhaa, بنها), was registered under the company name “The Original Guys.” Bahaa, the younger of the two operators, had spent a longer time in the US (8 years), was a college graduate from Egypt and had spent a considerable time on food carts at this spot. His cousin (who did not disclose his name) was older and had spent considerably less time in the US (2 years). Bahaa was in charge of receiving orders from customers and relaying them to his cousin who worked the grill. During this transaction Bahaa would perform a number of linguistic operations, translanguaging and code-switching. This allowed him to communicate to his cousin certain specifics of the food order while also being able to complete the financial transaction with the paying customer.   
  
  
The second example was the halal food cart on the North West corner of 47th and Broadway. The operators of this cart were also Egyptians and had developed an operational hierarchy similar to that of “The Original Guys”. The younger man, college educated and trained as an accountant, ran the main food operations of the cart. He would receive orders from clients, process payments and give orders to his colleague regarding stock changes or grill tasks. His cart assistant, an elderly gentleman who had been in the United States for two years and had low English proficiency, was lower level employee.

**Translanguaging and Code-Switching**

While interviewing the food cart vendors we were able to make note of how vendors negotiate the linguistic conflicts during the selling of halal food. An interesting example was the vendor Salman who worked the food cart at the intersection of 53rd street and Broadway. Originally from Algeria, Salman had learnt to speak Arabic and French first and then English and Spanish in later years. Although his Arabic dialect is Algerian, Salman could through code switching and translanguaging convey the contents of a client's order to the grill worker. He flawlessly integrated English, Arabic, and the Egyptian Dialect together. This ability positioned Salman as the vendor in charge of his own cart and the point person for communicating with clients. 

**Hierarchies in the Kitchen**

Our findings relating to how language abilities affect the employee hierarchies within the food cart prompted us to look into whether this is replicated in the main halal food cart kitchen in Astoria. The kitchen was the main operation area for the Halal Guys food carts and supplies food for all 6 carts owned by the operation. Inside the kitchen we conducted interviews with the general manager to find out how language conflicts manifest themselves in that environment.  
  
  
The Halal Guys kitchen originally employed a large number of workers from diverse backgrounds, most of whom were from Latin America, but also Egyptians, Algerians, and Tunisians. Egyptians we met usually call Latin Americans “the Spanish”, referring to the language they speak. Workers in the main kitchen are not required to be fluent in English/ They are required instead to have just enough English knowledge to communicate with workers who speak different languages with the bilingual Egyptian boss. However workers at the food carts have to be fluent in English so as to communicate effectively with clients. This effectively places food cart vendors on a higher standing than that of kitchen workers. Thus, another tier is added to the operation with food carts managers on top, grill workers below and kitchen workers at the bottom. 

**Egyptian Dialect as Lingua Franca**

Most recently, Halal Guys moved to employ a majority of Egyptians in their kitchen. This has been largely due to the recent crackdown by US authorities on undocumented migrants, many of which are Latin American; employees can no longer be payed in cash, and each needs to have a legal ID and social security number. The Halal Guy owners have started to employ Egyptians with legal status in the US. This has created a clear majority of workers who speak Arabic with an Egyptian dialect in the kitchen and understand each other perfectly.  
  
Arabic speakers from different countries have had to adapt to Egyptian dialect as a “Lingua Franca” as it has dominated the kitchen operation. This difficulty often means that workers unable to speak with that dialect are employed in jobs where communication is not a priority, as truck drivers or cleaners for example. More skilled workers like Salman, who are capable of speaking multiple languages and are fluent in the Egyptian dialect are promoted to working at the food carts. 

This video demonstrates recordings of Translanguaging and code-switching by food cart vendors during the daily transaction with clients ordering "Chicken over rice". This was chosen as a baseline for comparison between vendors' dialects. 

**Conclusions**

The halal food cart sits at the intersection of a number of networks, their mobile nature a good indicator of how these networks are manifested in the urban context. The effect of the linguistic conflicts are felt in the entire hierarchy of employment in the halal food operation in job positions and promotions. The ability to navigate customer service and administrative tasks is predicated on ability to speak English. That said, Halal Food Carts still act as an linguistic signifier, making their own distinctly Arabic contribution to New York City’s streetscape.

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